UNDERSTANDING SENIORS AND CULTURE

MULTICULTURAL ACTIVITIES GUIDE 3

Alberta
CULTURE

This publication is intended for use by administrators, community workers, recreation supervisors, volunteers, and others who provide programs or services for senior citizens.

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INTRODUCTION

Alberta has always been a multicultural province. Our history and development reflect the contributions of the population that settled here.

Alberta has never been an homogeneous society. Our first inhabitants, the Indians, have a diversity of cultures. Steady immigration followed the ampitious bid to settle the prairies at the turn of the century. Since the late forties, thousands of refugees have come to Canada. As well, our immigration policy encourages family reunification. This means that many people who were attracted to Canada in the last twenty years have brought their parents to this country.

All of these factors contribute to the creation of a province that has a senior citizens population that is culturally diverse. Most Albertans claim a background other than British. (see page 11).

Frequently agencies and service providers state that their programs are available to everyone. In reality this approach discriminates against some potential clients. Seniors may be unable or unwilling to participate in activities that are not developed to take into consideration their special needs.

As people age, culture may assume an increasingly important role in their lives. Seniors may choose to identify more closely with the culture of their childhood. Especially after a stroke, individuals may loose the ability to speak their "second language", English.

Although a need to be culturally sensitive is a useful skill for all Canadians, it is especially helpful when dealing with seniors. The intent of this publication is to assist those who work with seniors to become more effective at recognizing and meeting the special needs of the senior population.

References to the traits of specific cultures have been deliberately omitted in order to avoid stereotyping. Statements that identify cultural characteristics are often misleading. Generalities about a culture may be inaccurate for individuals. People are the products of their experiences and no two people are exactly the same.

This introduction would not be complete without a word of thanks to all those who provided information, advice and direction. Those who assisted with this publication are too numerous to acknowledge personally. The work of the researcher, Govind Sreenivasan, the writer, Barbara Metrycki, the review committee, New Horizons, the Senior Citizens Bureau and especially the Alberta Council on Aging must be recognized. Without them this publication would not exist.

PART ONE: UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENCES

Cultural differences can hinder understanding between people. Our cultural upbringing has a profound influence on the way we live, act, feel, and think.

These varied cultural experiences can create difficulties and misunderstandings or they may enhance the programs and services available.

1. CULTURAL VALUES AND EXPERIENCES

One's upbringing influences values. Seniors who have lived within a minority culture may have values and opinions different from those commonly held in Canada. The presence of these values may modify or unintentionally impede communication. People are the products of the experiences they have had and of the cultural influences under which they have lived. Consequently, their perceptions of the present may often be formed by what has happened in the past. For instance, children of Alberta homesteaders were often punished or taunted for speaking a language other than English. Now seniors, these individuals may be embarrassed or afraid to let others know they have a cultural heritage.

1.1 Male/Female Roles

The concepts of traditional male and female roles may be determined not only by one's generation, but also by one's culture. The existence of these concepts may hamper seniors' willingness to seek help or advice or to become active in programs that involve both genders. Depending on their values, some seniors may have difficulty accepting equal achievement and responsiblities for women. For some, what we perceive as a subordinate role may be the norm within the culture or the religion.

(One man had been an expert in a highly specialized field, but was unable to find employment due to his advanced age. His wife was forced to work as a seamstress to supplement their income. This troubled her husband deeply as he felt that he had failed to properly look after his family.)

A male brought up with certain cultural values might be insulted if advice was offered by a woman. He might not consider it appropriate no matter how qualified she is to give advice. The cultural values of a man such as this may cause him to screen out a woman's well-meant and carefully considered advice.

1.2 Concept of Government

Many seniors may shun government services because of their perception of government. Fear of officials could stem from previous unpleasant encounters. Likewise, other seniors may feel uneasy about revealing personal details to representatives of government. Sometimes this reluctance may arise from concerns about being recorded in two countries.

(When World War II broke out, a man went to serve in the military. After the war he tried desparately to locate his wife. Not wishing to return to a country that was under communist rule, he emigrated to Canada. Eventually he married and had a family. Sometime after his death, the family was contacted by an attorney who claimed the estate for the wife who was still in the country of origin.)

Some seniors may be unfamiliar with the role of government. Canadian programs and services may not parallel programs or departments in their country of origin and they may be unfamiliar with the type or level of service available. For example, medical plans and pension schemes differ widely from country to country.

1.3 Concept of Health

Different experiences may account for varing reactions to illness. Seniors' response to pain may depend on their culture. Some individuals of cultures with strong values of independence and self-reliance may not complain when feeling ill. They may see no point in burdening others with their pain. In contrast, individuals of other cultures may feel strongly that suffering is as communal as the rest of living. They may feel, therefore, culturally obligated to communicate their suffering to others.

1.4 Concept of Age

In Canada, some agencies consider a person over 55 years of age a senior. Other services and programs are not available until the person is 65. In some cultures anyone over 40 is treated with respect. At the other end of the spectrum are cultures that feel knowledge and experience are important qualities for leadership. Consider the average age of politicians in a country such as the People's Republic of China.

WAYS TO APPROACH CULTURAL DIFFERENCES:

1. Understand and accept that values may be different. Be aware that values sometimes conflict and be prepared to discuss different approaches to situations. Understand that situations are influenced by everyone's culture including your own.

2. Design social and health care programs to accommodate the needs of seniors whose expectations and preferences differ in many ways.

3. Organize discussion groups, on an intergenerational or cross-cultural basis, to explain, clarify, and support various values.

4. Establish classes to familiarize seniors with life in Canada.

5. Provide ongoing orientation workshops for staff and professionals.

6. Accent the future, most seniors still have many years ahead of them. Provide opportunities for individuals to set personal goals and directions and assist the senior to attain these.

PROGRAM EXAMPLES:

- The East Indian community in Calgary has recently formed a senior citizens group. The group meets regularly and has organized discussions and displays of government publications.

- The Immigrant Women's Centre in Calgary has established a cross-cultural parenting program. Members meet to discuss aspects of parenting and family life for new Canadians.

- Edmonton Home Care has a nutritionist who consults on diets that incorporate foods and recipes familiar to the client.

- During Universiade, Edmonton Millwoods Cultural Society for Retired and Semi-Retired staged a reception for the athletes and entertainers from India. Government staff working with the association was invited as a way of helping them understand the culture and food.

2. CUSTOMS AND BEHAVIOR

Preservation of traditional culture is usually very important to seniors. Traditions can provide stability in a changing world. People who have not practiced certain traditions for years, may return to them as they age. Seniors may cope better with altered lifestyles if familiar elements of culture can be maintained. However, traditions too, are changing and many seniors are adapting to these changes.

2.1 Cultural Heritage

The concept of cultural heritage implies the willing acceptance of different cultural expressions in everyday life — where individuals can enjoy community participation associated with their cultural heritage.

Ensuring continuity of culture may provide seniors with essential independence in their lives. Mental and physical deterioration may result from lack of activity. For example, being able to shop in an ancestral language and to exercise their own purchasing decisions, helps to maintain independence. Without opportunities such as this, self-sufficiency may be undermined and this can lead to seniors being passive and dependent.

Even living with the family may not guarantee preservation of culture. In some families, the traditions of culture which may have originally bonded seniors to the family may be eroded. Young and active family members may adopt other lifestyles and values. These may conflict with the values of the senior. Seniors may be unable to cope with these changes. Families may experience stress.

Many seniors have cultural practices that may not be acceptable in some situations. Some examples of this are the Sikh who wishes to carry a religious symbol, a kirpan (knife), onto an airplane, home remedies that some call child abuse, the requirements for cremation within a specific time period and without embalmment.

(A woman of East Indian origin was in great distress when she was told that she must remove her nose ornament in order for her to have an x-ray. Family members had a difficult time persuading her to cooperate with the medical staff.)

2.2. Religion

For many seniors religious devotion may become more important as they age. With a deepening of faith, they may wish to practise their religion regularly. For instance within Hinduism there is a belief that life has many stages. Rather than learning new skills or interests, the senior may prefer to focus on another level of understanding, perhaps exploring the divine within oneself.

Canadian systems are based on the Christian calendar and there is little general recognition of the holy days of other religions. Many places of business give time off for Christmas but few recognize Ramadan. As well, seniors needing to worship at the times demanded by their faith, may follow schedules that conflict with the programs and schedules of the rest of the community.

Others may adapt to local schedules very easily, and may follow their customs only if these customs don't interfere with their routine. For example, some seniors may choose not to attend a regular religious service on one day because they prefer to watch a favourite program on television.

For some, recreation preferences may involve religious activities. Songs and festivals may also be associated with their religion. Some will not participate in certain activities or start on a project because the timing is not right. Others will be unable to participate in activities because of religious restrictions.

Often, fear of travelling alone, ill health or poor weather may prevent seniors from worshipping at the times they choose. This may make them feel ill at ease but they may not verbalize their concerns.

Religious practices may be tied to the cultural backgrounds of seniors. Religious beliefs may affect seniors diets and other customs of daily life. Certain foods may be preferred or forbidden according to various religious regulations. Even the style of dress, as in the case of the turban, may be a symbol of religious faith.

2.3 Culture Shock

Culture shock results from the feelings of frustration that many new immigrants experience when they loose familiar signs and symbols in their lives. Seniors faced with new living arrangements may also undergo this syndrome.

Everyday cultural activities, such as how to greet someone, may be taken for granted. Similar incidences of culture may go unnoticed and be considered insignificant. Nevertheless, they may be very important to the senior.

The words used to address someone may depend on how well one knows that individual or the individual's age. A warm and casually phrased greeting by a stranger might be unexpected and could make the senior feel uncomfortable.

For instance calling people by their given names instead of using their titles (doctor, miss, mister) could offend some seniors.

Forms of salutation are just one of the many and varied cultural changes to be experienced. Hands placed together in front of the chest and a bowed head may be considered a more appropriate greeting than a handshake. Some women do not shake hands.

Other behaviors such as how to make purchases, when to accept or refuse invitations or gifts and when to take statements seriously, can also be confusing.

(Used to a commercial system where one habitually bargained for purchases, a woman was rudely treated when she tried to negotiate a cheaper price in Canada. Eventually she discontinued her trips to the shopping centre and thus severed her only contact with the outside world.)

Frustrations and feelings of inadequacy resulting from unfamiliarity with customs may make individuals unnaturally irritable. They may react explosively to minor problems because they are experiencing general stress. Some senior citizens may develop such insecure feelings that they are continually afraid of being cheated, robbed, or injured.

Seniors may feel the effects of culture shock keenly because they may not see the need to change their ways of doing things. At this late stage of their lives, some may lack the patience or energy to learn new languages, taste new foods, or make new friends. Some newly arrived seniors and those who have been here many years but have been sheltered by the family may refuse to learn a new language altogether. These individuals may feel out of touch with those around them. As a result, they may become lonely and submerged in their own culture. In extreme cases, complete withdrawal from society may result.

HOW TO ACKNOWLEDGE CUSTOMS AND CULTURAL PRACTICES:

1. Find out about the places and schedules of various religious services.

2. Locate commercial establishments which specialize in foods from various cultures.

3. Arrange regular visits to places of worship and commerce.

4. Become familiar with the dietary requirements of various cultures and religions.

5. Arrange, wherever possible, for serving of specific ethno-cultural foods.

6. Use ethno-cultural organizations as resources in the planning of seniors' programs.

7. Access religious leaders (priest, rabbi, imam, minister) for more information on how and what to plan and develop.

8. Ask seniors about their preferences.

9. Learn and ask about cultural nuiances such as body language and cultural distances.

PROGRAM EXAMPLES:

- The Stony Plain Heritage Centre involves commmunity seniors in the preparation of traditional lunches. Seniors also demonstrate skills such as Norweigian Hardanger embroidery in classes held at the centre.

- Bentley Senior Citizens' Centre stages an All Nations Day. Members who wish to offer something of their culture - a song, a poem or traditional costume or artifact - do so.

- The Ukrainian Canadian Social Services in Edmonton has initiated the "Beta Project" where volunteers visit Ukrainians living in senior citizens' homes. Services include readings from Ukrainian literature, celebration of traditional holidays and folk arts activities.

- The Japanese community in Vancouver has developed it's own "Meals-on-Wheels" program to provide familiar food to seniors who are confined to their homes, are in hospital or seniors' homes.

- Dutch seniors in Edmonton have created a tourist attraction by building a seven meter high windmill in a garden of tulips and other flowers.

- Many of the Japanese seniors in Lethbridge came here at a young age. The seniors developed classes in traditional song and dance and flower arranging.

3. STATUS

Being recognized according to a formal or informal ranking is a widely accepted practice. After having achieved a certain status in their adult lives, change to the seniors' lifestyles or situations may alter their position as "best cook", "best foreman" or heirarchical head of the family. Altered circumstances such as loss of employment, loss of spouse, ill health or immigration may place senior citizens at uncomfortable and lowered status levels.

3.1 Status in the Family

In some cultures elders are awarded special status by virtue of age. In these cultures seniors may expect and be shown considerable respect. Their culture dictates that they be acknowleged as sources of wisdom and authority.

However, changing lifestyles may diminish the influence that seniors have. Conflicts can arise when seniors' children, and particularly their grandchildren, adopt values and ways of behaving different from their own. Younger family members may have adjusted to a new way of life more easily than the seniors. In this context, the seniors' knowledge may appear outdated and their experiences irrelevant. Thus, a senior's influence as head of the family may be undermined.

In some circumstances, children may have established themselves here before arranging for their parents to join them. Children may now feel comfortable with their independent life in Canada and may feel unjustly criticized for not submitting to the demands of the older generation.

On the other hand, seniors may find it hard to accept their children's new role as parents, with established families of their own. For example, if the younger generation allows their children to adopt more casual ways of holding a conversation or grants them the independence more commonly shared by their peers, seniors may be upset. When they see old traditions of culture discarded and their protests ignored, they may feel slighted.

(In their country of origin, tradition dictated that parents live with their grown children and families. When one man's elderly parents immigrated to Canada they were shocked and hurt to discover that they were to be housed in a senior citizens home. They felt ashamed that their son did not want them living in his home.)

As the traditional roles of family members and their lifestyles are questioned, seniors as well as the family itself, may need help in learning how to cope. Both may be encouraged to cooperate in the establishment and to find new roles. While family members may recognize that not all of seniors' expectations are satisfied, both parties may often have to make concessions.

3.2 Status in the Community

The changing of family roles is only one factor contributing to a loss of status for seniors. Technical advances, too, may undermine feelings of accomplishment. Skills which the senior may have mastered over a lifetime may have become obsolete with the advance of new technology. Even though seniors may have achieved prestigious positions in their country of origin, they may experience unhappiness here when they are no longer recognized or held in high esteem. In some countries a government employee has more status than a teacher. Newly arrived seniors may be unprepared for the perception people have about the seniors past experience.

(A parent who had been employed in a prestigious position in his native land was unable to find employment after being sponsored to Canada by his son. He was relegated to the position of babysitter, which both humiliated and depressed him.)

Feelings of inadequacy may be further aggravated for seniors who are unable to speak English or who are financially dependent on their families. They may feel especially powerless in their community because they have to depend on others for even simple needs.

Depending on their former lifestyle, some seniors may be unfamiliar with institutional or organizational structures. Their inexperience may make them uncomfortably dependent on others. In some cases, younger people have taken control of the seniors group in a misguided attempt to be helpful.

Gradually, inactivity and dependence may overcome seniors and they may become indifferent to life. By losing their independence they may also feel that they have lost their right to be respected or to exert any authority.

WAYS TO IMPROVE SENIORS' SENSE OF WORTH:

1. Encourage seniors to maintain membership in ethno-cultural organizations.

2. Promote participation in recreation activities where seniors can learn new skills or display old ones,and thereby gain feelings of competence. Promote classes geared to the future of seniors.

3. Encourage seniors to preserve their links with the ethno-cultural community, so that they feel theyare contributing to the preservation of heritage. Provide opportunities for seniors to attend activities sponsored by ethno-cultural groups.

4. Establish intergenerational programs and emphasize to the seniors that their wisdom andexperiences can be very useful to others.

5. Organize an event to honour seniors in the community. Recognize their accomplishments and importance.

6. Research the history of a specific ethno-cultural community in Alberta in order to stress the pastcontributions of seniors.

7. Plan activities that include both seniors and their families so that their usefulness and position inthe family is strengthened.

8. Make use of discussions and group sessions. Work with the children, grandchildren, and seniors.

9. Use seniors as teachers and guest speakers.

10. Ask seniors to host and greet guests invited to your events.

11. Establish senior citizen clubs modeled after service clubs.

PROGRAM EXAMPLES:

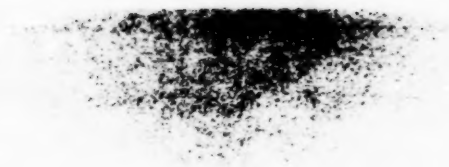
- The Armenian community in Edmonton is compiling information on the history of Armenian immigrants in Alberta. They hope to put this information into a book which will give the seniors a chance to "tell their story" of when and why they came to Alberta, and what life was like for them.

- The Ismaili community of Calgary sponsored a unique Canada Day picnic in one of the local parks. Families brought seniors along and made them the focus of the activities.

- The Korean community in Edmonton has developed a "Life Skills" program which is specifically designed to permit seniors to function independently. English instruction and films are offered.

- In Chinatown, a Senior Power program has been established. Seniors feel they have a useful role as they escort elementary school children to and from school each day.

- The varied ethno-cultural backgrounds of seniors are reflected in the diverse multi-cultural character of Alberta. There are 104 nationalities represented in Alberta. Fifty-two percent of Alberta's population has its origins in countries other than Britain (1981 Census).



PART TWO:
WHAT IS CULTURE?

Culture is the total way of life a people creates during the course of its history. It is the way it's members think and behave. The values and beliefs they hold, the social practices and structures influencing their conduct and the languages they speak.

4. CULTURAL IDENTITY

While some generalizations can be made about individuals with similar cultural backgrounds, many factors will have influenced and molded specific personalities. The variables of culture when applied to individuals are endless. Each senior is individually imprinted by experiences created by living within a minority culture in Canada, within the general culture of Canada or as a result of having lived abroad.

4.1 Ethno-cultural Groups

Some of the characteristics around which ethno-cultural groups may be formed are:

- *Common geographical origin, migratory status, race, language or dialect, religious faith;*
- *ties that transcend kinship or neighbourhood, shared traditions, values, symbols;*
- *similar preferences in literature, folklore, music and food;*
- *common settlement and employment patterns;*
- *special interests in regard to politics.*

Although these attributes distinguish people in ethno-cultural groups, they sometimes cut across these groupings. For instance Catholics speak many languages and English speaking people belong to many religious denominations.

The degree to which these features characterize any group varies considerably with the size, history, and length of time a group has been in any one place. Culture does not necessarily imply country of origin, for any of the features may be characteristic of a group not bound geographically. Finally all cultures are always changing.

5. ELEMENTS OF CULTURE

Individuals represent a unique combination of thoughts, feelings, attitudes and behaviour which have been shaped by life experiences. While common outward trappings of culture such as customs, foods, and music, may, at times, be attributed to members of the same ethno-cultural group, such generalities may be a form of sterotyping. Some ways in which actually similar people may vary are:

5.1 Language

Individuals may transmit their culture through their language. In some countries more than a dozen languages convey as many cultures. In China or India, there is no such language as "Chinese" or "East Indian", and individuals from different areas of the same country may be unable to communicate with each other.

5.2 Reason for Immigration

The motive for emigration may determine how individuals behave in their adopted country. Some individuals may have chosen to emigrate for economic gain or personal reasons. Others may have been forced to flee their native country because of political tyranny, fear of reprisal, or natural disaster.

5.3 Immigration Experience

Individuals may have different perceptions of Canada depending on the political, economic and social climate here at the time of their immigration. Eastern Europeans who emigrated prior to World War II may have been made to feel ashamed of their heritage. While those arriving in the seventies were encouraged to be proud of their culture. The race and nationality of the immigrant may also have had an effect on their reception here.

5.4 Politics

Politic affiliations can unite or divide individuals from the same country. In many countries politics assume great importance. Canada has received two major waves of refugees from Chili. Each group left after a change of government. Different political ideologies may polarize individuals within one community.

5.5 Religion

Religion is an important element of culture because it influences values and morals. Within the Jewish community, the practices of the Orthodox are different from those of many practicing Jews. Religion can also affect political sympathies.

5.6 Length of Residence in Canada

The longer the individuals have been here, the more likely they are to have adopted Canadian values and lifestyle.

5.7 Size of Ethno-cultural Community

In the early history of Alberta, whole communities were settled by people coming from one area. Franco-Albertans in a community such as Fahler may have retained more of their culture than those living in a community with a smaller French speaking population.

5.8 Special Situation in Canada

Some groups such as status Indians have legislated rights which may create distinctive cultural lifestyles.

5.9 Status before Immigration

In most cultures, respect is given on the basis of the position one holds in that society. The tribe, family, cultural grouping or financial resources of an individual may separate a person from others of the same country of origin. Although many European countries no longer have a monarchy, some Albertans are direct

WAYS TO INCLUDE CULTURAL VIEWPOINTS OF SENIORS:

1. Consider cultural influences to be an important component of each senior's personality.

2. Talk with individuals and cultural groups to determine those aspects of culture which are important to them. Assess which of these are not being met.

3. Provide opportunities for individuals and groups to meet their cultural needs.

4. Disseminate information about relevant programs to seniors' groups.

5. Encourage seniors to take full advantage of all available services and programs which meet their needs. Be sensitive to barriers that may restrict participation and adapt programs and services to work within a cultural framework.

6. Use the community as a source of advice, information, resources, and volunteers.

7. Encourage ethno-cultural communities to develop programs which are relevant to the needs/concerns of seniors within their communities.

8. Show that all cultures are important to the multicultural identity of Canada.

PROGRAM EXAMPLES:

- Forty percent of Alberta senior citizens have a mother tongue other than English (Alberta Bureau of Statistics 1981).

PART THREE: COMMUNICATION

Communication is a dynamic process involving language, its style and method of presentation. Successful messages are formatted in ways which are both understandable and acceptable.

Communication may take on a non-verbal form either by itself, or in addition to the spoken language. When working with seniors, this may mean not only ensuring that statements are given in a shared language but also that other cultural nuances such as facial expressions or gestures are taken into account during the communication process. A person from Vietnam might be offended if a request to come here is accompanied by a gesture such as a hand turned up, fingers curled, index finger motioning towards you. This is the way to call a dog.

6. BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION

Without proficiency in English, many seniors may be prevented from accessing services. Providing translation services or offering opportunities to learn English can improve some seniors' abilities to communicate. Making an effort to learn some of the clients language will show an interest in the person and could help to bridge a language gap.

Means of expression may also be influenced by cultural backgrounds. A communication misunderstanding may occur when non-verbal messages such as smiling, may be interpreted as approval.

6.1 Functional English

Seniors who may have difficulty communicating in English may include:

- *recent arrivals,*
- *women who have been isolated in their homes,*
- *those who have lived in Alberta communities where the majority of the population speaks a language other than English,*
- *those who have reverted to the mother tongue after experiencing a major medical or emotional crisis,*
- *individuals who are undergoing stress,*
- *individuals who are experiencing culture shock and are refusing to learn the language of the host country.*

The inability to adequately give or receive basic information in English can severely complicate the lives of seniors. Basic tasks of daily life, such as going shopping alone, may seem frightening to seniors who cannot ask for help or directions. These fears may inhibit seniors from functioning independently. They may feel insecure in society and may become increasingly dependent on others who speak their language. Sometimes, their fears cause them to live in isolation.

Similarly, limited vocablulary can cause anxiety. The terms to describe specific tools, tasks to be completed or items requiring repair may be unknown.

Health problems, which are associated with aging, may also be aggravated by lack of English. Some seniors may be unable to identify certain parts of their own bodies in English. As a result, explaining a medical problem without a translator becomes difficult. Yet, the presence of translators may cause embarrassment for the seniors. If family members translate, seniors may feel uncomfortable discussing their intimate problems. If the translator is a younger person, the senior may feel a loss of status. If strangers translate, there may be a perception that the confidentiality of the physician's office is broken.

Due to a medical crisis seniors who normally communicate in English may revert to their language of origin. They may be uncomfortable because they suddenly find they cannot speak English. This predicament may further compound their difficulties and make them seem more disoriented.

(When awakened by pain in an Emergency Ward, a patient became alarmed at her predicament. Unable to communicate with the hospital staff in English, her distress escalated and her

suffering became more intense. Fortunately, a passerby who was fluent in her language intervened and translated. Once the woman was able to communicate her suffering, she calmed down and staff were able to remedy her pain.)

6.2 Non-verbal Communication

The way in which a language is expressed can have a cultural base. Misinterpretations of non-verbal messages such as body posture, conversational style, or the nuances of language can impede communication.

For example, some cultures encourage touching. A kiss or a hug would not only be acceptable but expected while others would be uncomfortable with this behavior even from family members. Indians have a saying that we are created with two ears and one mouth so we should listen twice as much as we talk. Seniors that come from cultures where silence is expected unless there is something to be said may be misinterpreted as reluctant to contribute, shy or even arrogant. Other individuals may attempt to initiate a conversation by first establishing eye contact. Consequently, those who are taught that it is good manners to avert their eyes may be ignored, or worse, dismissed as being unfriendly.

The conventions of conversation may also be culturally influenced. The order in which questions are asked and responses given may be learned in patterns which are familiar to some but unfamiliar to others. Those born in North America may expect that a question would be answered with the most important information given first. Someone from the Caribbean might start generally and work towards the more complicated.

Non-verbal factors have significant impact on communication. By being alert and understanding of non-verbal signals, some misperceptions might be avoided.

WAYS TO OVERCOME COMMUNICATION BARRIERS:

1. Use census figures from Statistics Canada to determine the numbers of seniors in the community and their linguistic backgrounds.

2. Tackle language barriers from two directions: one, where possible improve the language skills of the seniors and, two, translate material, and information. Implement a language program for seniors that stresses day-to-day English vocabulary and expressions. Explore sources of funding for these classes from sources such as the Further Education Council or New Horizons.

3. Identify the language competencies of staff; post signs which indicate which languages can be spoken.

4. Encourage staff to take language training.

5. Translate key concepts and technical terms for use with clients. Keep these close at hand.

6. Keep a current list of individuals within ethno-cultural communities who are available for emergency translations.

7. Be sensitive to values attached to language, culture and race as well as to the words spoken.

8. Encourage members of ethno-cultural groups to enroll in service professions and adapt existing programs to accommodate students from ethno-cultural groups.

9. Locate agencies such as immigrant aid societies or ethno-cultural groups that can provide translation or translators. Contact the Cultural Heritage Division of Alberta Culture for assistance locating these.

10. Establish a multilanguage library. Subscribe to publications written in other languages. Contact the local public library to arrange to have them bring in books in appropriate languages through the Multilingual Biblioservice. This is a free service to patrons.

PROGRAM EXAMPLES:

- ***Help A Friend Learn English.*** This telephone tutoring program in Ontario pairs English speaking Canadians with Spanish speaking newcomers. The teaching is done over the phone using bilingual lesson books.

- The Chinese community in Edmonton provides a translation service for seniors to help them with pension applications, citizenship papers, or other business matters.

- The Kerby Centre in Calgary offers a two level course in *English as a Second Language* for seniors. Basic living skills such as shopping, using public transportation, or ordering food in a restaurant are covered.

- Some Homecare programs have identified the language competencies of their staff. The employees are linguistically matched with the seniors with whom they work.

- The B.C. Association of Social Workers publishes a directory of interpretors and multicultural services.

- Most immigrant serving agencies have a language bank (translators and interpreters). Many also have volunteer tutors.

- Edmonton Immigrant Services Association conducted a workshop for health professionals to help them deal more effectively with immigrants and refugees.

- Alberta Manpower Settlement Services has developed orientation guides for newcomers in five languages.

7. COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

Information on seniors' programs and services may not be reaching seniors. These announcements, directed at the general population through daily papers, T.V. stations or radio, may go unnoticed by seniors with little understanding of English. These seniors may keep up-to-date on current affairs through more specialized media which cater to their specific linguistic or cultural backgrounds. Funnelling information through these media and addressing ethno-cultural organizations may gain their attention. Some seniors may distrust news available to the general public.

7.1 In the Community

The majority of Alberta seniors live in their own homes or with family. Seniors may live with their families because, often, the family provides the continuity of culture that seniors need. Language, customs, and traditions of culture may be practised in the family home. Some cultures may dictate that the family looks after elderly parents and this may mean sharing the house with them.

Because of this seemingly independent status, agencies or other organizations may be unaware of the needs and concerns of this group. The seniors themselves, may not be familiar with programs and services which they might use. Professionals in the field of serving senior citizens may not have the necessary channels through which this diverse group can be reached.

While residing with their families, seniors probably live in neighbourhoods which do not reflect their cultures. In Alberta, many may be isolated in an English environment. Some seniors may be unable to converse with neighbours, sales or service personnel. If the seniors are members of a visible minority, language may not be the only cultural barrier they face.

7.2 Ethno-cultural Community Today

In large urban centers immigrants often settled in specific neighbourhoods. There they developed churches, stores and credit unions that serviced their special needs. With the exception of Chinatown, ethno-cultural neighbourhoods are less evident than they once were in Alberta. Our culturally diverse population is geographically spread throughout the urban areas. Because of the dispersion of our multicultural population, citizens may find it increasingly difficult to find goods and services specific to their culture near their homes. Seniors may have to become more and more reliant on their families for social interaction in their language of origin or for transportation to ethno-cultural centers and activities.

In previous years, agencies and professionals specializing in working with senior citizens could more easily locate and serve specific populations of seniors. Now isolated within the homes of their children, it is more difficult to make contact with them.

WAYS TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION CHANNELS:

1. Reach out and find seniors who may be living at home and unaware of programs and services. Use every available means to do so.

2. Use local multilingual cable television and radio services to advertise or broadcast basic informationon programs and services for seniors. Translate this information into various languages.

3. Issue translated information booklets describing programs and services; use ethno-cultural organizations to help in the translation, the design, and distribution.

4. Mail information to ethno-cultural organizations and coordinating councils for inclusion in members' newsletters and on bulletin boards.

5. Establish a write-in program so that people watching multicultural programs can ask questions in their own language. (The province of Ontario replies to 2,000 multilingual letters annually through programs on Cable T.V.)

6. Request an opportunity to speak before a local ethno-cultural organization. Use a translator to ensure that the information is understood.

7. Establish "hot lines" with ethno-cultural seniors' groups. Make sure all seniors obtain lists of who to contact, and how in an emergency.

PROGRAM EXAMPLES:

- The Jewish Senior Citizens Home in Edmonton produces a monthly newsletter about its services. The newsletter is written in both English and Russian. The seniors do all of the graphics themselves, and the translation is done by volunteers.

- Calgary Catholic Immigrant Services is developing a multilingual information videotape program. Speakers from different government departments will be invited to speak on various subjects. The talks will be videotaped, and the tapes will be transcribed in different languages. The organization will maintain a videotape library and video equipment.

- The Chinese community in Calgary has developed a project to inform the seniors in the community of their rights and responsiblities under the law. A law student has been hired to do research on the project, and a distribution of 10,000 pamphlets printed in Chinese is planned.

- The Korean community has published, in Korean, a directory for newly arrived seniors to help them feel more at home in their new home.

- Thirteen percent of Alberta senior men are widowed; fifty-one percent of Alberta senior women are widowed. (1981 Census)

PART FOUR: SOCIAL INTERACTION

Most seniors may need to have someone to talk to regularly to keep them alert and involved. They may need contacts with informal groups as well as with close friends.

8. COMPANIONSHIP

For seniors the need to have regular and close associations with others may be particularly difficult to fulfill. While the neighborhood may present opportunities to meet individuals of similar interests, language and background may limit chances for socializing. Widowed persons may be living in especially lonely situations created by lanaguage, transportation, or social problems.

8.1 In the Family

If they have families, seniors may feel more at ease if they live with or near them. Frequent family visits may provide needed moral support, but outside socializing may also be needed. Seniors may become isolated while living with the family. If family members are the seniors' only human contacts, then seniors come to depend on them for information about the outside world, and for social interaction.

Family support systems are changing. Other children of parents may live in distant cities, two or more family members may be working, family members may be busy with their own activities and the values of children and grandchildren may be changing. This often creates a system where there is no home support.

("I have a bad habit of smoking. My son knew from his childhood about this habit. But the attitude of my daughter-in-law was different. She told me 'No cigarettes. It costs. You do not earn here.' We are served two meals a day that are at odd hours. We are not allowed to have tea in between the meals. We have to remain in our room. This is house arrest.")

Unfortunately, families may not be able to provide the social nourishment that seniors need. In many households, both adults work and grandchildren tend to have full social commmitments of their own outside the home. Seniors may be frequently left by themselves. Seniors in a lonely home situation may find themselves wihsing for a fuller social life, but they may not know how to go about achieving this goal. Language alone may severly limit their opportunities to become acquainted and establish friends.

("I thought my happiness lies in the happiness of my children. We came here but did not see that my children were not the same. They changed religion, dress, food. How can I adjust with them? I decided to live independently. I knew only a few sentences of English. I am suffering from tuberculosis so I cannot work anymore. I get a pension which is not sufficient. But my pride, my religion, my ethics and values are more my priorities than other wordly things.")

8.2 Social Networks

Some seniors may not have had the opportunities in their middle years to establish social networks. For a variety of reasons, such as those discussed in Part Two (What is Culture), seniors may not have formed relationships which would sustain them throughout the years.

In some cultures the son is considered the priority. He is educated by the family. He may marry. The daughter is expected to care for her aging parents. Many of these women are extremely isolated. They may not have support to care for infirm parents so that they can get out or they may not have developed social networks.

In today's society, where families may move great distances, or where separation and divorce divide families, seniors may once again be among the disadvantaged. Those without friends and neighbours to close gaps left by departing families, may lack the support systems to manage on their own.

("My two children settled in Canada and they wanted me to join them. Being a widow my treasure was my children so I decided to come here. My son was in Toronto but unfortunately I had to come to Calgary because my brother was seriously ill. After two years my brother died. My eyesight is becoming poorer and poorer. My entertainment is — as you can imagine — nothing. My best company is God and that is my only support as my family is too far away.")

WAYS TO IMPROVE COMPANIONSHIP OPPORTUNITIES FOR SENIORS:

1. Provide support services to families who have a senior living with them. This support can be in the form of counselling or financial assistance or to help seniors with transportation to seniors' programs.

2. Encourage ethno-cultural seniors to widen their social circles by making friends outside the home.

3. Use the resources of ethno-cultural organizations to set up home visitation programs.

4. Encourage the establishment of ethno-cultural recreational seniors' clubs.

5. Foster inter-group communications among ethno-cultural communities.

PROGRAM EXAMPLES:

- The Jewish community in Calgary has developed a senior adults' program. The program includes citizenship classes, discussion groups, and current events.

- Organized visits to seniors in nursing homes have been established by the Ukrainian, Greek, Hungarian, and Chinese communities in Calgary.

- The Immigrant Women's Centre in Calgary has established a *New Friends* program which provides social contacts for immigrant women.

9. BELONGING

Seniors may need to feel that they are members of a group, to share the group's plans and even be a part of the gossip of its members. Cultural upbringing may determine which groups will appeal to seniors, but other considerations, such as individual life experiences, must also be taken into account.

9.1 Group Membership

Participation in organized group activities may satisfy some seniors' needs to belong. Some individuals may not recognize this need in themselves because family or colleagues at work may have fulfilled this role in their past. When seniors have experienced a loss of family or of employment, they may need to replace these affiliations with membership in religious, recreational or cultural groups. Some may not perceive themself as being old and do not want to join a senior citizens group.

Mixed groupings of seniors provide an opportunity for individuals to appreciate other cultures. However, cultural backgrounds may affect group membership. Unfamiliarity with customs may prevent recently arrived seniors from participating in seniors' programs. Some seniors may prefer activities of their own culture. For example, Bocci might be a suitable choice for an Italian senior, while bowling, which is a similar game, might never be considered. As well, seniors may feel more comfortable conversing in their first language. Other seniors may have prejudices about people of a certain race or culture and would not be comfortable participating in an activity with them. Some seniors dislike eating food that is unfamiliar to them. Although many seniors welcome the opportunity for learning and trying something new, some have the attitude, "Do not try to change me, I'm too old to do things differently."

Some widows may have the most difficulty joining a social activity. In some cultures the men have traditionally participated in recreational activities outside the home. Women, on the other hand, may have assumed purely domestic roles. Some widows may be restricted from open participation in recreational activities because of cultural or religious taboos under which they have lived for most of their lives.

(The staff at a seniors residence tried to involve one of the women in a physical activity program. After many attempts had failed, staff learned that this widow felt uncomfortable in co-ed situations. She felt that these activities were inappropriate for someone like her.)

Factors such as life experiences may be as important as ethnicity in determining whether a senior will feel comfortable in a group. While language barriers may restrict choices for some, factors such as specific interests, different economic or social backgounds or personal aptitudes and attitudes may also influence seniors selection of groups.

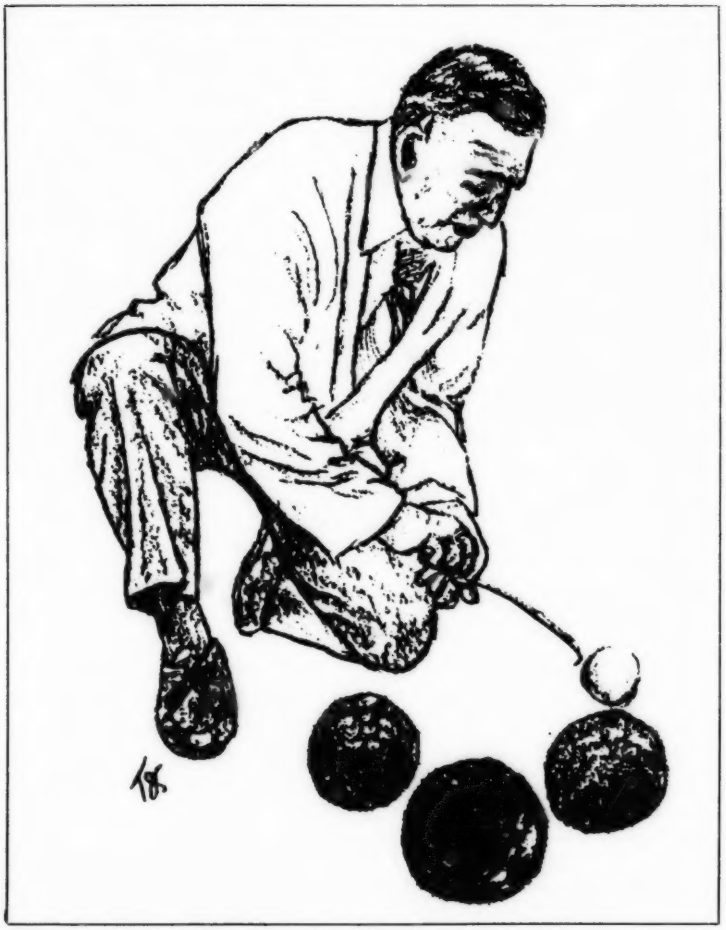
By involving the family, seniors who may be initially hesitant to join, may become very active participants. Family-style programs may be the first step in acquainting seniors with other opportunities for activity.

9.2 Cultural Programs

Participation and enjoyment of the arts can contribute to the satisfaction of group needs. Seniors can be stimulated by programs which incorporate books, music, theatre and the visual arts. Seniors could teach activities specific to their culture. Others may just appreciate the recognition of their art form. Through multilingual or bilingual choirs, many seniors who are fluent in more than one language may gain satisfaction and contribute to the community through performance.

Self expression in the arts can also help to overcome feelings of inadequacy which may be present due to lack of English language skills. Gaining a new crafts skill or learning how to play a musical instrument can create new confidence for some. In the same way, re-creating heritage arts can bring much pleasure to old fingers.

However, some seniors who have spent a lifetime knitting may feel that this is not a recreational activity but one of necessity. Now, unless there is a reason for the activity there is no purpose or pleasure in it.



WAYS TO HELP ETHNO-CULTURAL SENIORS FULFIL THEIR NEED TO BELONG:

1. Inventory existing recreational or cultural programs for adults; pay special attention to activities of ethno-cultural groups.

2. Review your assumptions about seniors of various cultures.

3. Organize bilingual, cultural and recreational activities to help seniors maintain social contacts. Use local Recreation Department specialists to help design programs.

4. Promote participation in structured or unstructured recreational activities to help individuals socialize.

5. Incorporate transportation arrangements into programs (where possible) to encourage seniors to attend.

6. Form senior citizens clubs in residences, auxiliary hospitals, or other institutions.

7. Present programs in familiar settings so that seniors feel more at ease.

8. Develop programs and activities sponsored jointly by seniors.

9. Have seniors be responsible for planning programs for others such as families, youth groups.

10. Invite seniors to sit on boards, commissions and committees.

11. Employ seniors for tasks that use their skills.

12. Use seniors to instruct classes.

PROGRAM EXAMPLES:

- Up With Seniors is a two day showcase held annually. Seniors from all parts of the community perform, are on hand for and entertain the community at one of the local senior citizens' clubs in Calgary.

- The Dutch Canadian Club in Edmonton has established facilities where it's seniors can play Dutch billiards, Dutch card games, and shuffleboard. There is also a library of Dutch books.

- A Japanese drop-in centre for seniors serves lunch three times a week in addition to running regular programs, one of which is videos from Japan.

- Seniors' choirs, registered with the Alberta Council on Aging, participate in mini choir festivals.

- In the 60-70 age bracket, only 46 out of 1,000 widows re-marry (American Insurance Tables).

PART FIVE: FINANCES

Loss of income may alter seniors' lifestyles drastically. Seniors without reliable savings or pensions, either from their homeland or from Canada, may suffer greatly if they do not have family support. In times of high unemployment and business slowdown, even families may not be able to extend the necessary financial help.

10. INCOME

Circumstances affecting seniors' eligiblity for pension may cause great financial strain on families who support their retired parents or relatives. Without income, seniors depend totally on their families unless they have other means of support. Even the cost of a bus pass may be a burden on some families. Seniors may sacrifice their own necessities in order to minimize the strain on their family. This may lead to deteriorating mental and phsycial health, and unhappiness.

10.1 Pension Eligibility

The Old Age Security Pension is provided monthly to persons 65 years or older who have lived in Canada for a required length of time. The minimum requirement is 10 years of residence in Canada after the age of 18 years.

Some seniors may not have proper documentation to be eligible for a pension. Sometimes equivalencies must be accepted by agenices or expectations made for documents such as wedding, birth and death certificates.

Some people may also be eligible for a pension from another country where they have worked if there has been an agreement signed with Canada with regard to retirement benefits. Seniors should inquire at the Canada Health and Welfare office to see if such an agreement exists with that country.

Many seniors do not understand the complexity or significance of pensions, annuities, income supplements and other forms of assistance.

(Because she had boarders, a senior had been denied the Guaranteed Income Supplement. When these boarders moved out, however, she didn't know that she could reapply. Consequently, she suffered a serious decline in income.)

10.2 Other Income

Seniors may try to obtain employment in order to alleviate financial stress. However, seniors may have difficulties finding work because of:

- lack of functional English
- unfamiliarity with Canadian society
- unsuitability for jobs due to age, poor physical condition or health
- inability to take certain types of jobs because they are beneath the status of the senior.

Seniors who have been sponsored by their children may have been threatened with deportation. They live in unhappy circumstances because they fear they will have to leave this country. Immigration will usually allow the senior to stay even if the family discontinues financial support. In cases of family breakdown, recently arrived seniors may find themselves in desperate situations and quickly become destitute. Some help can be given in the form of welfare if the senior provides a letter from the Department of Immigration stating that there is no other means of support. Fear of deportation or bringing shame upon the family will often keep the senior from obtaining this letter.

As described in Part One (Concept of Government), many seniors will not deal with government or do not wish for government to know about them. Others feel they will be obligated if they accept anything from government. They do not understand that they won't be asked for anything in return.

WAYS TO IMPROVE FINANCIAL SITUATIONS:

1. Ensure that seniors and their families receive information on all assistance programs and services, in translated form if necessary.

2. Provide support services for families who house seniors. This support can be in the form of direct financial assistance or simply organized transportation to take seniors to existing recreational or cultural programs.

3. Evaluate the skills of elderly individuals. Establish the kind of work experience they have had and determine if it is marketable.

4. Provide courses in areas such as budgeting, consumer information, cooking for one, entertaining on a small budget.

PROGRAM EXAMPLES:

- The Immigrant Liaison Centre in Edmonton provides information to immigrants in nine languages. The information usually covers pension eligibility, immigration rules, and the mechanics of the unemployment insurance system.

- The Korean Community in Edmonton has developed a *Job Co-op* program which is aimed at increasing income and reducing dependency. Firstly, some instruction on job interviewing is given. Secondly, the background and work experience of the seniors is determined. To date, seniors have established a hydroponic agricultural company, done some quilting, and are considering going into shoe manufacturing.

11. WIDOWHOOD

Widowhood is common to seniors of all cultures. However, since women in Canadian society live longer than men, more women than men may be left to care for themselves in their elderly years. Because some cultures encourage women to marry at a young age, and often to a mate who is much older, women from some cultural backgrounds may be even more likely to be widowed.

11.1 Roles

In the perception of some people, many widows may have assumed subordinante roles in their marriages. Thus, when faced with managing the business details of their lives on their own, they may completely lack financial skills or knowledge. They may not know how to make deposits at a bank, or how to pay bills. Many may not know how to drive and they may be unaccustomed to traveling on their own.

On the other hand, seniors of either gender who have been through an immigration experience, may exhibit an independent spirit. These widowed seniors, regardless of their roles in life may have learned self-dependence. Thus, when faced with difficult times such as the death of a spouse, they may not require professional support services and will choose to avoid them. They may not reveal their difficulties and may prefer to work things out for themselves.

Other widowed individuals may favour family advice and assistance. Many families may take their familial responsibilities seriously and aid may be readily given to seniors. At times, reciprocal aid may be readily given by children in repayment for help which they themselves received when they were newly married.

However, family support is dependent on many variables. Not all seniors will have this backup system. Many widowed seniors may not have a network of family and friends to support them. They may be unable to work out their problems by themselves. As a result they may need the help of agencies or organizations.

WAYS TO ASSIST WIDOWED SENIORS:

1. Offer programs that provide an orientation to basic money matters. Prepare simply written materials on the subject that can be used by individuals as future reference.

2. Make use of existing information sources such as the various newcomer guides on life in Alberta and Canada.

3. Establish classes that familiarize seniors with life in Canada and Alberta.

NOTE:
Materials designed for immigrants are relevant and adaptable for those seniors who are not newly arrived, but who may be experiencing culture shock due to an altered lifestyle.

4. Learn about the ways different cultures deal with death and burial so that appropriate support may be offered during the grief process.

PROGRAM EXAMPLES

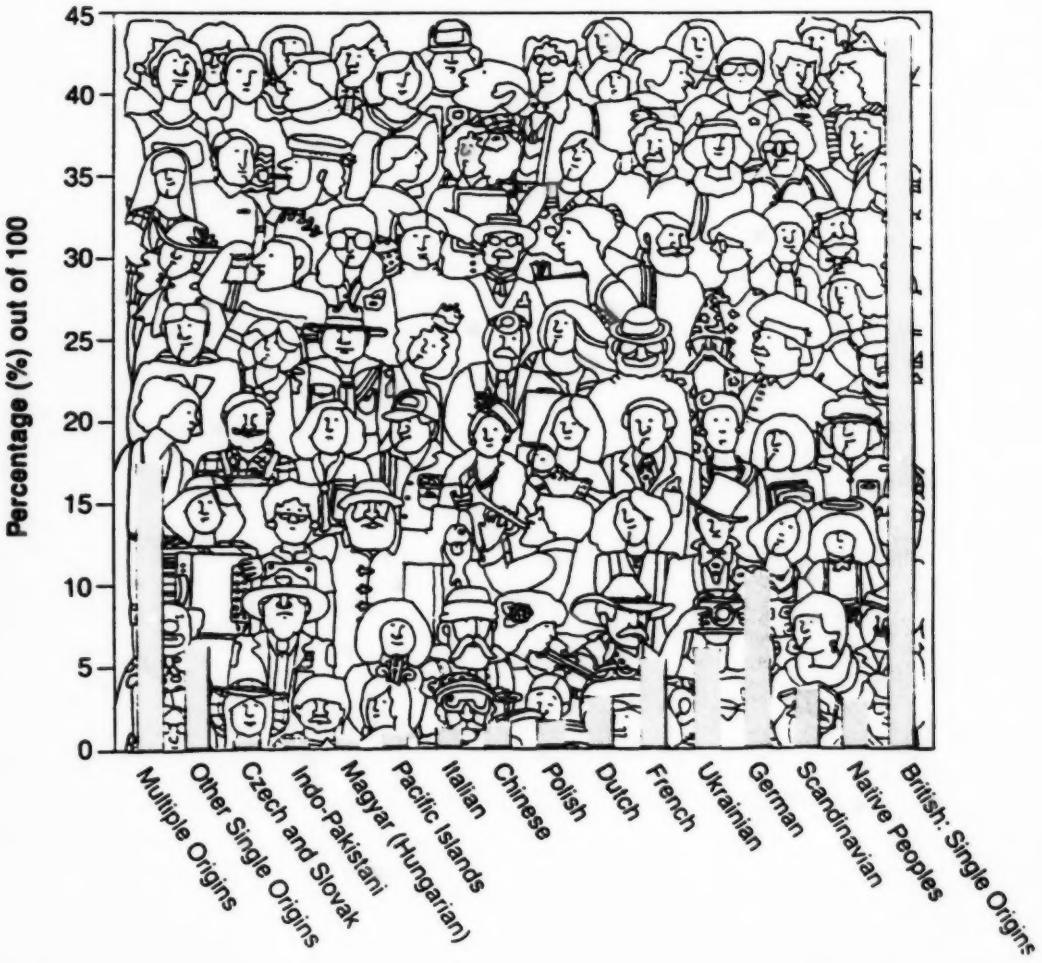
- The Women's Secretariat publishes books which provide helpful advice on subjects such as financial management to women who have been widowed.

- The YWCA in Edmonton has a group called *"On Our Own"* for widows. The group provides support for widows and gives members opportunities for discussion.

- Alberta Manpower publishes ten information booklets for newcomers to Alberta. The booklets cover such subjects as driving, finances, health care, employment, education, housing, community services, and the law.

Ethnic Group	Percentage (%) out of 100	Ethnic Group	Percentage (%) out of 100
British: Single Origins	43.5	Chinese	1.66
German	10.53	Italian	1.21
Ukrainian	6.18	Pacific Islands	.75
French	5.05	Magyar (Hungarian)	.69
Scandinavian	3.55	Indo-Pakistani	.60
Dutch	2.94	Czech and Slovak	.51
Native Peoples	2.71	Other Single Origins	6.12
Polish	1.70	Multiple Origins	12.3

Source: *1981 of Canada: 20 per cent Data Base.* Statistics Canada, April 26, 1933.



PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF ALBERTA'S POPULATION BY ETHNIC ORIGIN, 1981

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